



HELPING YOUR KIDS COPE WITH STRESS

School is out! Summer vacation is here! What more could your kids want?

How about relief from stress? A 2007 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) report urges physicians to assess children for signs of stress, anxiety and depression. The report says that among the sources of stress in kids are over-scheduling and the lack of time spent playing. The AAP is so concerned that it has published *A Parent's Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens*. You'll find information about the book on the group's website at <http://www.aap.org/stress/stressparent.htm>.

But what can you do to help your children cope with stress? You can start by understanding that while some level of stress is normal (and may even be beneficial!), high levels of stress can be a real and serious problem for children of all ages.

Think about the things that stress you out. They may include worry over the economy, frustration with the political process, pressure to find the time to do everything that has to be done, concern that the world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place, etc. The less control you have over these things, the more stressful they are.

Now, look through the eyes of your children. They also are aware of these stressors, and they have even less control over them. Add childhood experiences that can be stressful, such as bullying or over-the-top pressures to succeed in school or at competitive sports. Of course, facing these kinds of stressors helps children learn to meet challenges, and most kids come through fine. But the stress level can be too high and unrelenting for some. They feel overwhelmed and may struggle.

If your child is under too much stress, you may see some of these symptoms:

- » Regression to an earlier stage of childhood, such as becoming "clingy" or more dependent on a parent
- » Unusual irritability
- » Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- » Having nightmares or trouble sleeping
- » Use of alcohol or other substance abuse
- » Showing signs of depression, including loss of enjoyment of favorite activities

If your children appear to be struggling with these or other signs of stress and you feel it's too serious to deal with on your own, your EAP can help with evaluation of the problem and referral to the proper provider. And here are a few steps you can take to reduce the stress your children are under and help them cope when they face stressful situations:

- » Set an example for them: Let them see how you relieve your stress, including by taking time to relax and to get exercise. Handle family problems as calmly as possible.
- » Talk to your children about the stresses they face. Help them find constructive ways to deal with these problems.

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- » Lighten their load when necessary. Your children may be trying to do too much. You may have fallen into the over-scheduling trap. If this is a problem, sit down and discuss what's important and what your children want to do. Decide what activities they can do without.
- » Let them be children. Give them time and opportunities to simply play, to do things for the sheer enjoyment. They may behave in ways that seem silly and frivolous to you, but don't ever forget – *they're children*.

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for financial, medical, psychiatric, psychological or behavioral healthcare advice, or as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

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¹ Stress, Teen's Health, (http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/stress.html); published by Nemours Children's Health System.